24.236/636: Race and Racism
September 10, 2014

"Our" concept of race

Readings: Blum 2002, Ch. 5-6.

Blum distinguishes three conceptions of race:
i) What we think we mean, or what we think our conception is ("the popular account" (98-99))
ii) What we mean, or what our actual conception is ("our actual practices" (99-106))
iii) The "classic" conception (127-8)

Although Blum sometimes speaks as if he is talking about the linguistic *meaning* or semantic value of the term 'race,' it is better, I think, to understand him as elucidating a complex cognitive model for race.[1] As he points out, he is not just talking about language. For example, he says: "Race is not just a way of classifying people, or of talking about people; it is not just a "discourse." It is a way of thinking about, experiencing, perceiving, and relating to people" (102). He also characterizes what he is describing as an "ideology" (e.g., 117ff). Ideology is a complex and controversial notion, but it is useful to see it as not just a set of beliefs, but also a perspective or stance on the world that affects, as Blum suggests, perception, affect, action, etc.

(i) The popular account

> Races are large groupings of persons, distinguished by physical features such as skin color, hair texture, and facial features. Some people have dark skin and woolly hair, others light skin and straight hair....Races are just part of what the world consists of, like stars, trees, and animals. (98-99)

He adds that the popular conception assumes that racial classification is scientifically validated, and that even if we cannot easily categorize some individuals or groups, we can "leave it to scientists to say which races North Africans (Maghrebins), Turks, and South Asians belong to" (99).

Crucially, for Blum's purposes, according to the popular account "racist attitudes [are] distinct from racial classification: in the popular view, merely *classifying* someone as racially "black," "Asian," or "white" carries no evaluative valence." (99)

Blum argues that the popular account is a misrepresentation of our cognitive model for race: "The racial groupings we employ do not merely correspond to differences in somatic characteristics" (100). How should we understand this claim?

It may be useful to distinguish first-order attitudes and second-order attitudes. First order attitudes consist in beliefs, desires, imaginings, hopes, etc. Second order attitudes are attitudes *about* these attitudes. We not only believe things, but some things we also believe we believe. Sometimes we desire to desire things (whether or not we actually do). I think Blum is suggesting that the popular account captures what we believe we believe about race. But because not all of our attitudes are transparent to us, we also have attitudes about race that we aren't aware of and don't acknowledge. This is relevant to the issue of reflective endorsement (105): "it is characteristic of contemporary racial thinking that many, perhaps most, people who engage in it would not reflectively endorse the elements implied in its usage...Nevertheless, people continue to engage in racial thinking and language that does carry these deleterious implications." Moreover, he notes:

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[1] A useful summary of Lakoff on cognitive models and its connection to politics can be found here:
http://semanticcompositions.typepad.com/index/2004/09/what_george_lak.html

Racial thinking has manifested substantial staying power in American life. And it has done so in part precisely by remaining outside the domain of reflectively endorsed ideas. (106)

(ii) Our "actual conception" of race

Evidence that the "actual conception" of race differs from the popular account. (Better: evidence of further elements of the implicit cognitive model of race.)

- Only some physical features are the basis for human classification – why skin color, e.g., rather than other ones?
- "Passing" shows that ancestry is relevant to racial classification, so it isn't merely a somatic classification.
- We are often "reluctant" to classify people in to races, not just because we are unsure of what race they belong to, but because it seems to be morally fraught.

How might we draw a cognitive map for race? Compare with, say, a cognitive map for 'mother.'

"Moral dangers" of racial thinking, i.e., of employing the current cognitive model for race.

- Racial thinking implies a moral distance among those of different races (102).
- Racial thinking imposes a false commonality on all those classified as members of the same race (103). This is a "cause and product of racial stereotyping".
- Racial thinking suggests an inescapable "racial fate"; one is "trapped or stuck with the characteristics attributed to one's group" (104).
- Racial categories "tend to evoke associations of superiority and inferiority of value" (104).

Blum concludes that the cognitive model for race, and racial designation as a practice, is not morally neutral. The popular account's suggestion that racial classification has no evaluative valence is wrong.

(iii) The "classic" conception

Last class we considered several elements of the "classic" conception of race. What does Blum's chapter offer that Stocking's essay didn't? How does Blum's story about the social history of race in the American context contribute to understanding the "classic" conception?

What is Blum's argument for this claim:

[I]t was the combination of the official egalitarian beliefs that made up an important component in American political culture, combined with the South's (and to some extent the North's) economic and social stake in slavery, that set the stage for the full articulation of a racial ideology. (118)

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Fall 2014